

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 41: Faxing from the Net ***

E-mail can seem ubiquitous, but we know it's really not. If you thought about it, you can probably name several people, companies, even whole countries that don't use electronic mail. If the people whom you want to communicate with have a fax machine, you're in luck: there are a variety of services that bridge the gap between the Internet and the world of fax machines.

It doesn't matter if you don't own a fax machine or a fax modem: using these services and your Internet connection, you can send and receive faxes. Even better, some of the services for sending faxes are free. Some aren't. All of the services that let you receive faxes charge for that (although perhaps less than you'd think.)

These services are great for those of us who need to send or receive faxes occasionally, but don't want to invest in a fax machine and phone line. Or business travelers who can't afford to let important incoming faxes languish in the machine back at the office while they're out of town. Even if you have a fax machine and never leave the house, sending faxes via the Internet can be an inexpensive way to communicate with far-away associates. You can send a fax to Costa Rica or Kuwait for free, for instance. For areas that aren't covered by a free service, you can use a commercial service to fax for pennies a page.

Let's start with sending a fax. There are three types of interfaces: the web, e-mail, and client software on your computer. On the web, you go to a particular URL of a "fax gateway," enter the phone number and your message, and press the send button. Easy! For e-mail interfaces, you send a message to a special address -- usually including the recipient's fax number as part of the To: or Subject: lines. Or, with client software, you install special software on your computer and compose your faxes from there, which are then uploaded to the Internet.

Once you've sent your message -- by e-mail, the web or software -- your message finds its way to a fax gateway, a machine that takes your message from the Internet and faxes it to its ultimate destination.

Your message will be routed to a fax server in the vicinity of its destination. The Internet is used to move your message most of the way -- the actual fax phone call will be a relatively short distance, reducing telephone charges. The larger systems that can fax anywhere in the world may have hundreds of fax servers scattered around the globe.

The smallest systems (the free ones) only have a single fax server and cover a limited area, such as a single town or small country. For instance, one service offers free faxes only to Sacramento, California; another to Ecuador. The only exception to the small-is-free rule is TPC.INT, a free faxing system that spans 25 countries including many parts of the United States. (For a list of its coverage area, see http://www.tpc.int/fax_cover_auto.html)

There are no freebies when it comes to receiving faxes. However, if you don't have a fax machine or you need to receive faxes while on the road, one of these services can do the job nicely. When you sign up with a service that lets you receive faxes, you are assigned a phone number. When an associate sends a fax to

that number, it is digitized and made available to you online. Some services e-mail the faxes to you, while others make them available on a private web site. Or, if you're using special client software, the faxes will be downloaded into that.

The commercial services tend to be very reliable and have decent rates compared to making long-distance calls yourself. There are many commercial services, each with its own features and pricing structure, so you'll have to do some research to find the right one. The free services can have drawbacks: most notably, coverage is spotty. Also, free faxes that you send may contain an ad on the cover page -- maybe not appropriate for business communications.

To find a service and get started, there are two web pages that you should visit: my own FAQ, "How can I send a fax from the Internet?" and Michael Frost's Internet Fax Services Review. Both are fairly comprehensive roundups of fax services. Michael's does a better job of price comparing the commercial services, while my FAQ lists more free services that cover limited geographic areas.

What are you waiting for? Go fax!

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TPC.INT coverage list: http://www.tpc.int/fax_cover_auto.html

FAQ: How can I send a fax from the Internet?: <http://www.savetz.com/fax/>

Internet Fax Services Review: <http://www.netpower.no/frost/fax/>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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